1. On 9 April 1997, Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, speaking before the Commission on Human Rights, said that the right to development was the measure of the respect of all other human rights. "That should be our aim: a situation in which all individuals are enabled to maximize their potential, and to contribute to the evolution of society as a whole."

2. That is in fact the aim of the rural movements and peasant organizations of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements (FIMARC). They have been engaged for many years, with courage and determination, in a daily struggle to usher in an economy based on social objectives and solidarity, which will contribute to the development of the whole individual and of all people.

3. In its progress report on the Right to Development (E/CN.4/1997/22, para. 29), the Group of Experts pointed out that realizing the right to development is more important now than ever before. They reached that conclusion because they found that, despite overall global economic growth, 89 countries were worse off economically than they were 10 or more years ago.

4. While there is no doubt that the responsibility for realizing the right to development lies with all the development actors of the international community, it is also true that rural and peasant communities, often with minimal resources, are not the least committed to this realization of the right to development. A clear indication of this is their numerous initiatives in many sectors of activity and the variety of alternatives they undertake in order to satisfy urgent basic needs.

5. It has to be recognized, however, that in practice the need to promote an environment which is favourable to development is continually opposed by the neo-liberal economic model. This model is gaining ground everywhere in the world, leading to growing domestic inequalities, increasing marginalization and worsening conditions for the masses, and the destruction and wastage of world resources by and for the benefit of a minority which holds economic power.

6. This neo-liberal model, under the control of an increasingly small minority, is using its monopoly to influence national policies. States are more and more exposed to financial speculation and are forced to comply with the general economic directives laid down by international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. The economic strategy of these international bodies inevitably leads to privatization, the introduction of monetarist policies and a weakening of social solidarity systems.

7. In this situation, fundamental rights, such as the right to land, to health, to basic nutrition, to housing, to education and to organize, are denied and flouted, although some progress had been achieved here and there in recent years, thanks to grass-roots mobilization. In some countries, rural communities are in addition penalized by being subjected to physical violence. This violence is imposed by fundamentalists, paramilitaries or drug traffickers, who use rural areas as a safe retreat.

8. In order to defend their means of production and employment and to build better alternatives for life in rural areas and the recognition of their identity, rural and peasant communities are organizing and developing alliances, in order to gain sufficient strength to make their voices heard.

9. It is inadmissible that 50 international companies should control the greater part of trade in agricultural and food products, that only 6 companies dominate 85 per cent of world trade in cereals and that a mere 3 companies control 83 per cent of the world banana trade. These international companies impose on all countries a type of globalization, which works only as a support for liberalism. In order to increase their profits and disregarding the impoverishment of biological diversity, the companies register patents which make peasants dependent on the products they sell.

10. These practices are well known in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The dependence on artificial species, created by biotechnologies, causes concern to peasants, who consider it a threat to their food security and to their future family income, as well as to the eating habits of the whole population. Patent rules would in effect make it illegal eventually to produce crops on the basis of seed saved from one year to the next. In Europe, the efforts made by some multinationals to introduce genetically modified products are raising doubts among both producers and consumers regarding the value and purpose of such efforts, especially since, in Europe as in other continents, the potential risks entailed by the new technologies, for human health and for the human environment, are carefully hidden.

11. The rapid development of intellectual property rights and the new international trade rules established by the World Trade Organization have speeded up laboratory research and aroused interest in the astonishing biodiversity wealth of southern countries, which now offers undoubted commercial potential. By lodging patents, trading companies using traditional medicinal plants will increasingly be depriving whole populations of their right to use these plants without paying a royalty.

12. In addition, some indigenous communities are afraid that their own genes might one day be patented. Despite the limited means at their disposal to combat such undertakings, these communities are calling on Governments to prevent individuals, companies and multinationals from taking these projects further and to recognize that any patent originating in their territories (including human genes, medicinal plants, seeds, etc.) constitutes a theft of their intellectual property.

13. The FIMARC movements are trying to establish an alternative economic system serving a fairer and more human world and are trying to develop a form of active citizenship, where the individual participates fully in the development of his local community, as well as in that of the human community as a whole. They are all convinced that their message and their action should contribute to placing people at the heart of any project and that all projects, a fortiori economic ones, must serve a social objective. It is also clear to everyone that there is an increasing need for a comprehensive approach to deal with the challenges of globalization in the service of neo-liberalism, already criticized above.

14. In this respect, they endorse the proposals of the aforementioned report of the Group of Experts (E/CN.4/1997/22 - para. 94), which suggests taking measures "to counter the adverse effects of globalization and liberalization on the development prospects or human rights condition of people, especially in weaker countries".

15. As an NGO enjoying consultative status with the United Nations system, FIMARC calls on States and Governments to heed and accede to the requests of rural and peasant communities. The FIMARC movements are aware, as expressed in the Human Development Report 1997, that "poverty is no longer inevitable. The world has the material and natural resources, the know-how and the people to make a poverty-free world a reality in less than a generation." They are also convinced that "poverty is not to be suffered in silence by the poor. Nor can it be tolerated by those with the power to change it."